Challenging the curriculum, exploring the discipline boundaries in art, design and media

How do curricula in higher education renew and revitalise themselves, to take account of possible new partnerships with other disciplines, new knowledge and changing world politics? Can they do it through reflection and inward facing analysis, or is it necessary to look outwards to change?

The three key note speakers at the 5th International CLTAD conference on enhancing the curriculum in art, design and media epitomised this approach. Professor John Carson Head of School of Art, Carnegie Mellon University spoke on “The X-Factor: Extending Territories for Art”. Carnegie Mellon University is committed to bringing arts and sciences together; one of its defining architectural features is the bridge between the science and arts buildings. Carson writes: “I am interested in art that accepts no boundaries, art that constantly seeks new audiences, art that challenges conventional thinking...” He was profoundly influenced by his postgraduate experience at the California Institute of Art, where artists were not obliged to categorise their work as film, painting, sculpture or print, which he found enormously liberating. His practice and educational leadership thereafter has been dedicated to finding and dismantling the barriers and boundaries which limit people’s concepts of art and what is possible in their own practice. His own practice is astonishingly eclectic, including ‘drawing, prints, photographs, performances, video, audio, television and radio broadcasts’, illustrated in his presentation through a mix of photographs of his work as a member of ArtAngel, which made temporary artworks in public places, and a live performance reproducing a variety of newspaper sellers’ calls. John Carson is in the tradition of anti-establishment artists who can’t see a socially organised boundary without wanting to cross it. His work was exciting, his passion and commitment obvious and contagious, and over the course of his professional life he had met and overturned principles sacred not just to the bourgeoisie but also to elite art education.

Hannah Higginson, the second key note speaker, brought to the fore some of the environmental challenges we face, from the perspective of the fashion industry. Her presentation, “Fashion in the future: Fashioning an ethical industry” explored ideas developed in collaboration with the Green think-tank, Forum for the Future. In partnership they have developed scenarios of how fashion and consumerist society may adapt in the future to shortages of water and fabric, to changing demographics, to use of sweatshop labour. As she said, ‘the approach and resources developed through the project to support the integration of sustainability into the curriculum have relevance across all programmes of study’. Hannah Higginson’s work is deeply challenging to the premises on which we conduct our lives, and offers us very different ways to think the consequences of product design and our consumer habits for the people and environment around us. We have an enormous task ahead of us to understand the implications of our current lifestyles in the environment and the consequences we face in the future. However, we largely accept the premise of the unsustainable environmental impact of our current lifestyles, although we are a long way from understanding how best to resolve these.

The need to use interdisciplinary teams and techniques to address complex and immediate world problems was also a concern of Philip Barnard, the final key note. A cognitive scientist at Cambridge University, he writes that he is ‘committed to seeing the types of basic cognitive theory developed in scientific laboratories put to good use in the real world.’ Since 2003, he has been collaborating with Wayne McGregor from Sadler’s Wells in London, to see what cognitive science can contribute to the way choreography is developed and interpreted in performance. As he says ‘such work is hard’ because it involves people with different goals and different discourses who have a problem they can only solve by working together across the principles, tacit assumptions, habits and language which would ordinarily divide them.

Of all three keynotes, this one was probably the most challenging to the audience. Philip Barnard’s session was the only one in which I was conscious of the audience twitching uncomfortably, and perhaps the frosty silence was greatest when he discussed his understanding of creativity not as something intangible (‘not magic that flies into your mind’) but the outcome of hard work and very specific (and documentable) processes.

The conference brought together two key elements for learning and change, being both safe and challenging. It brought people together from all around the world who identify as university teachers and art, design and media, and having that in common, are willing to share and relax together. But importantly it also nettled people, challenged them that not everyone shares their assumptions and certainties, that other disciplines may have practices and belief structures which have something useful to show us about the world we are in.

The Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design was established in 2000, to provide support for in creative disciplines within the University of the Arts London, and nationally and internationally. One of the ways we have done this over the years is through an international conference, ‘Enhancing Curricula in Art and Design’. Over the years we have taken the concept of international very literally, running conferences in London, Barcelona, Lisbon, New York, and most recently, Berlin. The conference was attended by delegates from 15 countries. The conference organiser, Felix Lam, after a career of running wonderful conferences in the field of University educational development, has just retired and will be sorely missed.